

RollPlay

GM
NOTEBOOK
ISSUE 3

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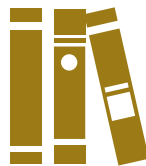
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Welcome, Patrons!

It's been an exciting month for RollPlay, with the arrival of our new show RollPlay: Blades and the colossal one-shot we put together for Dogs in the Vineyard, as well as the continuation of Court of Swords - with all the blood and mystery that show brings to the table. I'm so glad to have y'all here to share in the sometimes-secret work we do to prepare for these shows from a GM perspective.

This issue brings you some notes about the continuation of Court of Swords and thoughts on expanding the world while we work through the incredibly lethal early period of 5th Edition D&D's character progress. As well, I've provided all the prep documentation for the town of Poor Mercy, a Dogs in the Vineyard town so that you can, if you'd like, use it wholesale for your own Dogs games at home. I'm thrilled to have John Harper on board for this month's zine as well, bringing you his notes on prep for the inaugural episode of Blades. We close the issue with another secret transmissions from the ancient past of 3200...

Thank you so much for your support, and welcome to Issue 3 of the GM's Notebook.

Adam Koebel / RollPlay GM

This short essay was written on October 27th, 2016 and, as such, **contains spoilers for the first 12 episodes of Court of Swords**. Thou hast been warned.

REFLECTIONS ON MORTALITY

Death and Progress in D&D



Dungeons & Dragons makes for weird television. I don't mean D&D in the "all roleplaying games" sense like I might use kleenex as a tissue stand-in. Dungeons & Dragons specifically has some very unusual challenges when we present it as a spectator activity. We're about a dozen episodes into Court of Swords as I write this, and D&D has offered me, as a GM, some very interesting (and occasionally frustrating) challenges that I haven't been faced with in a RollPlay show before. D&D

is incredibly lethal at low levels. Encounter balance is designed to gently (or roughly, as your preference as a GM goes) guide characters from level 1, where they're soft and fragile, to level 3, where they become "real" characters. In a way, we play out the origin story of those characters to learn who is strong and who is weak - there's a sort of PC Darwinism at play in the first few levels that acts as a filter for characters who might not make it into the campaign proper.

Velimir, Baern, Zephyra, Wester and Janus - names of the dead etched on the dungeon walls of Court of Swords. PC tombstones arrayed before us. Now, this isn't the most lethal campaign I've ever GM'd - Moldvay D&D has the honor of most kills-per-episode but it is incredibly lethal for a long-running show-format D&D game. Which I think is the trick - we're not just playing Dungeons & Dragons, we're creating a work of fiction that's interacted with in a way that the designers of the game never intended or anticipated. Mike Mearls and his team, in designing 5e D&D, created a game with specific lethality curves and balance rules intended for use at the table with a group of 3-5 PCs (optimally). They didn't design a system intended to tell stories to an audience of thousands of returning fans. That's not what D&D was made for, and in using it for that, we're coming to terms with some interesting things.

First off, I think there's audience expectation. Not just the conscious expectation that we might bring to a show, knowing that the cast is playing a game and, as such, there's more than a little chaos that might come down on our fragile protagonists - I mean the more

insidious expectation that comes from watching TV shows. When we absorb media, we hold it against all the TV shows and movies, comics and novels we absorb. So, even if we're able to acknowledge the randomness that comes from improvising nearly



fifty hours of content, we carry some subconscious expectations into that. Which is what makes death in a live RollPlay campaign so jarring. When a character dies in any other media, their expiration comes with a meaningful impact on the narrative



at large. They might die heroically, sacrificing themselves for a greater cause or they might die pointlessly to issue a thematic statement about nihilism and the emptiness of life. There are reasons, whatever they are, to these things. In D&D, it is not always so. In D&D we can die randomly, for nothing. Because RNGesus has turned his back on us and we met our fate ignobly. This jarring expiration affects us as a cast, as well. It's not a negative thing, but as participants in this improv experiment we are all sometimes left wondering "why did this happen?" all the while knowing there is no "why". Which is funny - because D&D is a lot more like life that way, isn't it? Sometimes bad things just happen.

As a GM, the struggle here is about responsibility and balance. Particularly, for me, the balance of how hard to push these sad little pre-characters. D&D provides tools for encounter balance, telling me how many goblins (moguai, excuse me) I can throw at my players while remaining "fair" to them within the constraints of the design of the game. I am expected to prepare a certain number of Easy, Medium, Hard or Deadly encounters and to mix and match them as the players slog their way through the swamp of

mediocrity that is levels 1 and 2. Only, the snag here is that this setup, this mechanism of balance, is designed for an environment in which the only participants are the players. There is no audience in D&D. The conundrum becomes how to balance encounters for an audience. If I populate my campaign with the expected number of Medium encounters, we'd be spending more or less all of the show in combat or combat-potential situations. Level growth would slow to a crawl and we'd spend a lot more time in the lower tier levels, running higher and higher risk that a single crit would take out one of our PCs, despite the encounters themselves being considered "Medium" difficulty. I've chosen to front-load the bloodiness of this campaign by focusing mostly on a short series of Deadly encounters, where the risk is high, but the reward is equally juicy. Instead of two or three encounters between a Long rest, we have one. This changes the pacing of the game and, I think, makes it more extreme.

There are a lot of factors to consider in the deadliness of a game - how skilled the players are at the mechanisms of survival and success, how well engineered the party is (both in terms

of race/class of individual characters and on the party synergy level), encounters and their frequency, but it's all held up in a RollPlay show against the expectations that the game will be entertaining. It's a fascinating balance, and one that I think we're seeing a lot of pioneering being done. When you look at a game like Court of Swords (and, I expect, the West Marches and even Solum before it) you're seeing GMing work being done that hasn't ever been accounted for by game designers. While it can be frustrating or confusing to come up against the death of a character mere hours after their introduction or the seemingly pointless end to a character on the sharp end of some bad luck, we all (cast and audience) have the opportunity to be part of a new form of story. A new thing that forces us to recognize that we are subject to that most unpredictable contributor, luck.

AFTER THE MOGUAI CAVE



The Moon-and-Priestess Scroll

The most important thing that the characters bring out of the cave with them (aside from their continued existence) is the scroll detailing the history of the tomb and of the monks that once occupied this part of the Xulin Valley. It depicts monastic life in the region during a period of several decades during the Jin Duo Dynasty. The veracity of the document can be confirmed by any historian with a proper education and establishes a historical precedent that the Court of Coins had a settlement here earlier than any Court of Swords settlement existed. It is a valuable document to any historian but, moreover,

as a political implement, is highly valuable to both sides of the Xulin Valley dispute. It is, in addition to everything else, a beautiful work of art, with impeccable brushwork and a serene and understated artistic style.

As a footnote, for anyone who translates or reads the scroll, there's something here about the people of the Valley being "blessed by some ancient song" that hints at the hidden nature of the Valley.

Officer Lin and Company

The Xulin Valley is technically a no-man's land, but with villages and villagers occupying the place, there

is a need to police and manage the citizens there. As such, both sides of the conflict allow a very-highly observed and managed police force in the Valley. When the PCs were, at some point in the past, observed entering the Forest of the Dust and Ghosts, Officer Lin was deployed



with a handful of backup officers, to investigate these mysterious strangers.

Lin's priorities are to uphold the law and protect the (Court of Coins) villagers in the Xulin Valley. He assumes that the characters are adventurers and, as such, assumes that they are a) greedy b) violent c) fueled exclusively by a desire for money. He's careful and cautious, but also recognizes that he's the authority in this matter and considers the adventurers interlopers in his jurisdiction.

The law dictates that the Xulin Valley is under the protection of the Bái Yá Monastery and that as a monastic protectorate, tomb robbery is considered a significant crime, punishable by imprisonment and fines. Lin assumes the PCs have robbed the tomb, and will hold them here while he sends someone to investigate what happened inside. He asks the PCs to turn over anything they found inside, and if they resist, he threatens them with his legal power. If the PCs draw weapons, he threatens them again, but will not attack first. If the PCs attack, he does as well, attempting to knock the PCs unconscious and take them back to a nearby village to be dealt with by

the legal machinery of the Court of Coins.

The Journey Back to Móng Vuốt

On foot, the journey from the Forest of Dust and Ghosts to Móng Vuốt takes approximately four days, if the PCs use the roadways and paths that lead up out of the valley. If the players stay off the roads and keep away from travellers, it will take nearly twice that time. If the PCs ended their encounter with Officer Lin peacefully, there's nobody looking for them, though they're likely to come across some farmers along the way. If the encounter with Lin ended violently, and they left no survivors, start a countdown clock with each day ticking off a segment.

- + Peaceful Spring's constabulary realizes that Lin has been absent for a full day, and dispatches a group of scouts to the Forest of Dust and Ghosts
- + The scouts discover the bodies of Lin and his Officers. (If the PCs buried the bodies or hid them, have the PCs make a Survival roll - if the Officers can beat this on a Perception Roll they find the corpses, if not, they spend 1d3 days searching before finding the

bodies).

- + The scouts begin tracking the PCs, moving quickly after them.
- + The scout party comes across the PCs, and attempts to capture them for the murder of Officer Lin.

If the PCs take the stealthy approach, the step between 3 and 4 will take them actually finding the party. Maybe the PCs will have an opportunity to ambush the scouts, but regardless, an encounter occurs on day 4.

Encounters in the Woods

If the PCs take the stealthier route back to Móng Vuốt they might encounter any number of forest creatures. Here are some examples;

- + A pair of bears, hungry
- + Some scavenging moguai (at night)
- + A cluster of the animated dead, left to labour by the elves who passed through

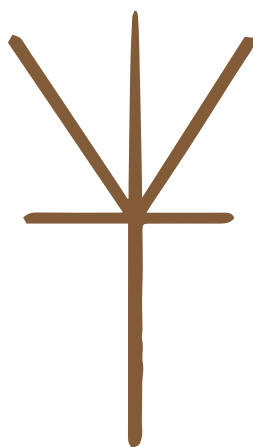
MÔNG VUỐT FORTRESS TOWN

The town is build up around an ancient fortress, originally build in an age when the Courts of Coins and Swords were more directly in conflict, designed unofficially to act as a platform for the Court of Swords to step in and take control of the Xulin Valley. While the fortress itself no longer houses any large-scale military units, there is a presence there.

As a military town, Móng Vu t doesn't have a traditional Court structure. The town falls under the jurisdiction of the Fortress Commander, who is beholden to the local Provincial Knight. The Fortress Commander is a woman named Văn who has served in the Court of Swords for three decades as a military commander and, briefly, as a Magistrate. She is an Air Genasi and is respected by all those who know her. She commands a small group of soldiers who keep peace in the town, numbering about two dozen.

The town contains a number of shops and services, and has a total population of about two thousand. There is a major temple to the Chariot, and shrines to many of the other gods. A local tavern called the Perfect Apple Inn serves travellers who come to the Xulin Valley to trade or to visit the bamboo forest or hot springs. This Inn is where the “trader” Kukrit lives and meets with his mysterious companions.

The area around the town is rocky terrain, mountainous and rough, with a single road leading south through the mountains towards the riverlands and the rest of the Court of Swords. The mountains contain a number of dangerous elements - monsters are known to plague travellers and most who can afford to do so travel with guards. The town walls have been attacked more than a few times over the ages, but have not been broken in recent memory.



DOGS IN THE VINEYARD ONE SHOT PREP

What follows is the notes for my prep for the RollPlay:

Dogs in the Vineyard one-shot. It follows from the protocols for Town Creation in Vincent Baker's game of the same name. You can use this town as-is to play Dogs in the Vineyard, or you can modify and manage the Pride, Sin and False Doctrine to create your own custom version of Poor Mercy. Have fun!

You can find a video of me creating this work here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEl8felwSm4>

WHAT'S WRONG IN POOR MERCY?

Pride

- Sister Prudence has a husband, Brother Eli who can't get her pregnant. He's barren. Maybe he was in an accident or something? Bad fight? Whatever. So she found someone else (his father) Brother Elijah to give her a baby (Little Baby Chastity).

Led to Injustice

Someone didn't get something they deserved - Eli and Prudence didn't get a family. Elijah's Wife, Sister Adelaide (Eli's mom), didn't get the baby that her husband should have given her. Elijah's other wife, Sister Lavinia didn't also get that baby. The baby didn't get the honest family it deserves.

Sin (SEX) and also (VIOLENCE)

- Sister Prudence had sex (once) with Brother Elijah
- Elijah's Wife, his youngest Sister Lavinia, found out, and is having sex with Brother Eli

- Brother Ezekiel (Sister Lavinia's actual brother) found out about that and stabbed Eli.

Sin (DECEIT)

- Steward Nathaniel knows about Prudence and Elijah and the baby. One night, while drunk, Brother Elijah confessed the whole thing.
- Nathaniel didn't tell anyone, except his wife, Sister Clementine, who was shocked at first, but understands the pragmatism shown.
- Nathaniel and Clementine don't have kids, why not? (miscarried because of the town doctor and his back east medicine)
- Doctor Benjamin Wellington (sometimes Doctor Wellington, sometimes Doc Ben depending) doesn't know about any of this, but DOES know that there was a bad mumps epidemic some years back and suspects many of the men in town are infertile as a result

False Doctrine

"So long as it is fruitful, all sex is sacred."

"The true Father of a child matters not, only who birthed it and the family into

which it is birthed.”

“The Father of all Children is the King of Life.”

False Practice

- The cultists are now fucking whoever they want in secret.
- People are getting pregnant and not knowing whose babby
- Nobody is telling the Steward anything anymore

False Priesthood

Our Sorceress is *Sister Prudence*, who is, in secret, trying to get pregnant again by *Brother Cyrus* (a rube, unmarried, young, foolish, etc.)

Our followers are *Elijah*, unwitting and unwilling but unable or too ashamed to do right.

Lavinia doesn't believe the doctrine, but could be swayed. Same with Nathaniel and Clementine.

Demonic Attacks:

From without - the town's crops are failing because they're being choked out by hostile weeds. There's a plague

of fecundity of the wrong sort. The Cuckoo Weed (something to do with it being a favourite seed plant of the bird in question)

From within - family is eroding because nobody knows whose blood is whose. The cult has the demons out spurring lust.

Eli and Prudence had a bunch of sex, but it didn't work. Both blamed each other. Prudence and Elijah had sex once and Prudence got pregnant. Lavinia found out, and pretended to understand but revenge-fucked Eli, who had sex with her because he wanted to prove he wasn't an infertile hombre. After that, Elijah told the Steward, who told his wife. Lavinia never got pregnant. Prudence started showing, Eli was super happy because he made his wife have a baby. Everyone is fine and happy, except that Prudence has some ideas about what makes sex okay or not.

Brother Eli (Son of Elijah, Husband of Prudence, Slept with Lavinia, “Father” of Chastity)

Wants the Dogs to... bless his now-fruitful marriage, christen Chastity officially, not to find out about him and Lavinia fucking.

Brother Elijah (Father of Eli, Husband

to Adelaide and Lavinia, Slept with Prudence, Father of Chastity)

Wants the Dogs to... absolve him of his guilt, tell him he did the right thing, reward him for being a goodly man, protect his son.

Brother Ezekiel (Stabbed Eli, Brother of Lavinia, Husband of Rebekah)

Wants the Dogs to... bring punishment on some sinners, but not on others. Bless his actions as holy fury but not punish Lavinia for what she did.

Steward Nathaniel (Husband of Clementine, Father to Nobody)

Wants the Dogs to... be in charge, take control, fucking fix things where he was too cowardly to do so himself.

Doctor Benjamin Wellington (Husband of Elizabeth, Father of Several Kids)

Wants the Dogs to... LISTEN TO REASON. These people are all going to get syphilis and die, for fuck's sake.

Brother Cyrus (Lover of Sister Prudence)

Wants the Dogs to... say it's okay to keep having sex with Prudence. Not

dissolve the cult, not make a mess of the sweet lovin' he's getting. Also say it's okay not to have a wife, because he wants to sleep with MORE ladies.

Elizabeth Wellington (Wife of Benjamin, Mother of Several Kids)

Wants the Dogs to... not hurt anyone? Not cause too much trouble. She's scared of them. They're scary.

Sister Prudence (Wife of Eli, Once Lover of Elijah, Mother of Chastity, Sorceress)

Wants the Dogs to... either anoint her as some kind of spiritual leader and make her heresy official or else, I don't know, fuck off?

Sister Adelaide (Wife of Elijah, Mother of Eli)

Wants the Dogs to... tell her what her husband did that's got him so beside himself, because King of Life knows he won't say himself. Also, to bless her new grandchild with a long and happy life.

Sister Lavinia (Sister of Ezekiel, Lover of Eli Just the Once, Wife of Elijah)

Wants the Dogs to... convince Ezekiel to chill the fuck out, absolve her of her sinful sex with Eli and put things right.

Sister Clementine (Wife to the Steward, Mother of Nobody)

Wants the Dogs to... give her a divorce from her lily-livered husband and / or force someone better to be her husband and the Steward instead. Maybe that handsome young Brother Edwin.

Sister Rebekah (Wife to Ezekiel, Cousin to Cyrus)

Wants the Dogs to... empower Ezekiel to get **RIGHTEOUS VENGEANCE** for her cousin-in-law and to put Eli in the ground because he ain't right and maybe shoot some other folks she doesn't like much neither.

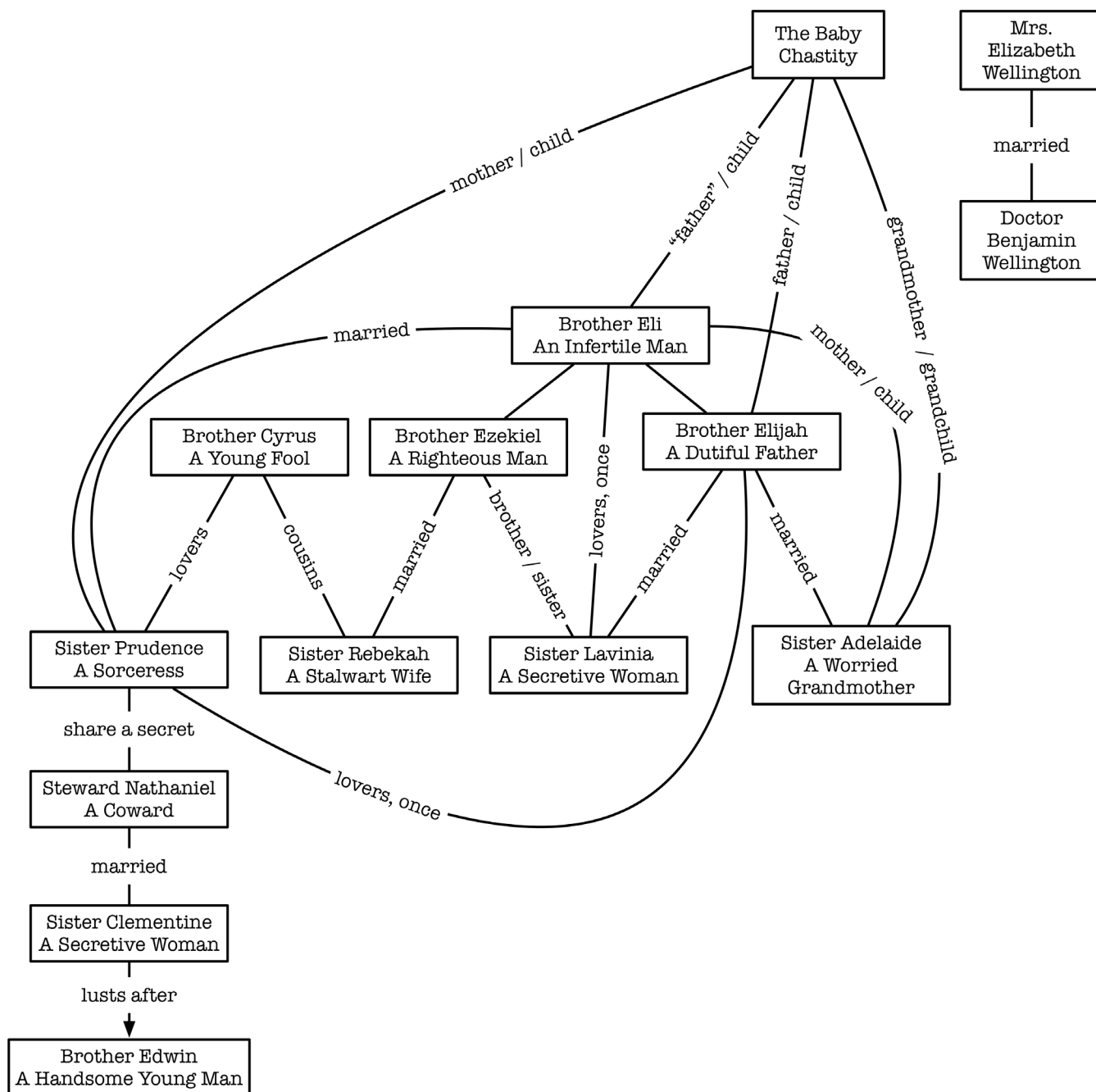
Wants the Dogs to... join in the fun.

If the Dogs Never Came, What Would Happen?

Prudence's false church would gain the support of most of the women in town. Cyrus would kill Ezekiel when he made an attempt on Prudence's life, Rebekah would be forced to either join the sex cult or be burned at the stake or something else gross. The Steward would probably end up dead, maybe by his wife's hand. The sacrifice of the Steward would fill the fields with blood, and the weeds would die and the corn would grow tall and mighty. There'd be all kinds of unaccounted-for babies but lots of big families. The Doctor and his wife might get inducted into the cult? Eventually, the whole town would be a big interrelated sweaty mess.

The Demons

Wants the Dogs to... make it law that any infertile man be killed ritually. Say it's better to be fruitful and multiply than to be faithful. Abolish marriage altogether. Create some kind of doctrine around group sex rituals? Legitimize the whole thing by accepting Chastity for what she is - a bastard and a blasphemy.



RollPlay BLADES

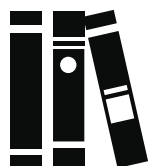


INTRODUCTION TO BLADES IN THE DARK

Blades in the Dark is a game about a crew of daring scoundrels seeking their fortunes on the haunted streets of an industrial-fantasy city. There are heists, chases, occult mysteries, dangerous bargains, bloody skirmishes, and, above all, riches to be had — if the crew is bold enough to seize them. Will they rise to power in the criminal underworld, or be crushed by their rivals? We'll play to find out!

Blades is inspired by video games like *Thief* and *Dishonored*; by TV shows like *Peaky Blinders* and *The Wire*; by movies like *Crimson Peak* and *Ronin*, and by books like *Jherog* and *Best Served Cold*.

In this RollPlay series, we'll follow the exploits of a crew of Assassins (the PCs). They've been recruited by the team leader, Carriless Firm (Geoff's character). We don't yet know why Mr. Firm has come to Daskvol and started an assassination team, but that will come to light as we play more. I'm excited for you to see what we have planned!



ASSASSIN CREW

TIER: 0

REPUTATION: Professionals

LAIR: Abandoned library

CREW UPGRADES: Assassin's Rigging (they can carry extra weapons and gear on a job). Hidden lair (no one knows about the library).

SPECIAL ABILITIES: Deadly (each PC gets a bonus in Hunt, Prowl, or Skirmish)

THE CITY

The game takes place in the port city of Duskwall. There's a map and some landmarks included here in this issue of the notebook so you can get a better idea of the places the PCs might go during the game.

IS IT DOSKVOL OR DUSKWALL?

You'll probably hear us call the city different names as we play. Like most cities, this one has many names and nicknames, collected over its long history. It was originally called Doskovol (literally, "This is the Skov King's coal mine") when it was settled as a mining camp centuries ago. The Imperial surveyor lists the city as "Doskvol" on her maps. The locals usually say "Duskwall" — a corruption of the ancient name in the modern tongue. In the underworld, you'll hear criminals refer to "The Dusk".



LANDMARKS

1 THE VOID SEA. During the cataclysm, the oceans turned to black ink. Tiny points of light, arrayed like constellations of stars, can be seen far below the surface. Only the bravest or most desperate of captains dare to sail beyond sight of land, into a sea as black and dark as the sky above. The vengeful ghosts which plague the land tend to shun the open ocean, but there are more terrible things prowling the deeps.

2 THE LOST DISTRICT. A once wealthy area, ravaged by plague then abandoned to the Death Lands when the second lightning barrier was built. Contains many lost treasures for the foolhardy to seek out.

3 IRONHOOK PRISON. A towering metal fortress, where the worst (or most unlucky) criminals are incarcerated. Many are forced into labor in the Southern fields and pit-mines of Dunsloough. The condemned are sent to scavenge in the Death Lands.

4 GADDOC RAIL STATION. Electro-rail trains from across the Imperium arrive here daily with goods and passengers.

5 EELERIES & FARMS. About half of Doskvol's food needs are met by imports; the other half is gathered locally from eel farms, mushroom caverns, and crops nurtured by wondrous radiant energy lamps.

6 OLD NORTH PORT. Before the deluge of the second century, the Dosk River delta was only a shallow bog surrounding a coal mining settlement. Ships used the Old North Port to dock and re-supply before crossing the open sea to Skovlan. The obsolete port was abandoned to the Death Lands when the second lightning barrier was built.

7 THE DEATH LANDS. Beyond the lightning barrier, the world is a barren wasteland of petrified trees, ash, and choking clouds of black miasma. Legions of restless ghosts ceaselessly search for the faintest spark of life essence upon which to prey.

DISTRICTS

WHITECROWN. The sprawling estates of the Lord Governor, Hunter Commander, Master Warden, and Doskvol Academy.

BRIGHTSTONE. The grand mansions and luxury shops of the wealthy elite.

CHARTERHALL. The city's civic offices and the hub for shops, artisans, and commerce.

SIX TOWERS. A formerly rich district, now worn down and dilapidated.

SILKSHORE. The "red lamp district" and artist community.

NIGHTMARKET. The trade center for exotic goods imported by rail. Many vendors also trade in illicit goods.

CROW'S FOOT. A cramped neighborhood of multi-level streets, ruled by gangs.

THE DOCKS. Rough taverns, tattoo parlours, fighting pits, and warehouses.

BARROWCLEFT. Residences and markets for the farmers who work the fields and eeleries.

COALRIDGE. The remnants of Doskvol's original hilltop mining settlement, now home to artisans and laborers of all types.

CHARHOLLOW. A maze of tenements and squalid row houses.

DUNSLOUGH. A labor camp served by convicts and a ghetto for the destitute poor.

WEALTH High  Medium  Low 



Irimina's Hit-List: Series Premise

When the players created their crew, they chose a favored contact from the list provided. Their choice was "Irimina, a vicious noble." She sounded like someone who would need assassinations done. All the players seemed like they wanted someone to get jobs from, at least at the start. This is usually a good idea for a sandbox-style game. A few solid missions can get the ball rolling while the players learn about the setting and develop their own connections to the fiction. Once they do that, they'll start creating their own missions to address their character's goals and drives.

During my prep for episode one, I thought more about this "vicious noble" and fleshed her out as a character. I decided she would be from the Kinclaith family, a once-powerful noble house, now in decline. I'm running another *Blades in the Dark* series right now, and in that game I introduced

Roethe Kinclaith, an idle noble and expert duelist. I thought it would be fun to tie the worlds of the two games together, using the Kinclaith family.

Lady Irimina has gone to some lengths to uncover the parties responsible for the dissolution of her house's power and has created a hit-list to eliminate the offenders. Are they all actually guilty? Will the PCs care? Is Irimina a trustworthy client, or a treacherous viper like her noble heritage would suggest?

In episode one, Lady Irimina sent the PCs on a "trial run" to prove themselves worthy to tackle her hit-list. She selected Magistrate Dunvil as the target, a city official who had slighted her house (she didn't specify how, and the PCs didn't bother to find out).

I decided that Roethe had been trying to slay Dunvil in a duel, but the Magistrate had managed to avoid openly refusing the challenge. Lady Irimina wanted the PCs to make it look like Dunvil had been killed in a duel, so her

house could take credit for it as an example to her enemies. I think this will be an ongoing gimmick for this game series, with Irimina asking the PCs to perform each assassination in a particular way to suit her need for vengeance and status among her peers. I'm curious to see if the players will enjoy these restrictions or if they'll find them annoying.

In episode two, we'll learn more about the hit-list and I'll include further details here in the GM's Notebook as various NPCs come to light.

House Kinclaith

Tier: II

Elders: Lord Morgan and Lady Edith (deceased)

First-Born: Genevie (deceased)

Second-Born: Irimina, now house elder (aristocratic, proud, vicious)

Third-Born: Roethe (aristocratic, cold, deadly)

Holdings, Past & Present:

- 3 leviathan hunter ships. Tempest, Lancer, and Harrow. (Lost to other houses, reassigned by the Ministry of Provisions via legal loopholes and bribes)
- Estates in Whitehollow, Ilysia, and Imperial City. (Lost to creditors)
- Estate in Duskwall, its servants, carriage, and boat. (Still retained, in disrepair)

One of the core concepts of the game is that the rulers of the Empire are thoroughly corrupt and prey on each other constantly in games of influence, wealth, and status. Usually, the lower classes are the unfortunate victims of these games, but in this Blades series, the PCs will be in a position to directly affect the course of some of the nobility's power plays. Should be interesting to see what they chose to do.

Transmission Intercepted xF33A0.02-122DWNRI

SWAN SONG

“We are not Gods. You are not a God. I am not a God.”

Storium Notes: Kingdom of Coin

- * review and pillage all google docs from the old BW sessions ✓

SWN House Rules

- goals-for-XP primary means for advancement } assess based on pg. 132 *
- missions act as GM-set bonus goals
- helping capped at +2 (like Aw)
- loot on salvage (roll Tech/Astronautics or Tech/Postech)
7: 1% value 9: 2% of value 11: 4% of value 13: 10% of value
- Culture = Circles (BW)
- Add stat bonus to saves
- multiply teleport distance by 10, roll a ~~1d10~~ save or lose TP for 1d8 rounds
- full hp at level one

* 750xp / 1000xp / 1500xp etc based on how long it might take, in "adventures" 0

Andoni: What Is Known (Culture/Gunnhild, Culture/Traveller, Culture/Spacer)

- 6: Andoni recently (~1 yr) upgraded its fleet and blockaded the planet
- 7-8: A deal with Ximinez Shipyards was cut to purchase fighters, frigates and destroyers
- 9-10: The Andonian Cultural Defense Force was formed to "protect Andoni from undue and unhealthy influence from hostile foreign influence"
- 11-12: Rumors abound to the real reason, but some believe that recent excavations in the planet's northern continent uncovered alien technology
- 13: A research team from the Richardson Foundation dropped all contact just before the blockade, with an encrypted message about "a massive device of unknown origin buried under the polar ice"

+ additional rolls can be made re: Ximinez Shipyards, the Richardson Foundation

The Mission (750xp) January 12th, 3200

- Courier a case from Andoni to Gunnhild VIII's third moon, to a research facility there and your employer, one Dr. Sekler. (Sekler works for the Richardson Foundation)
- Pay: 20,000 credits

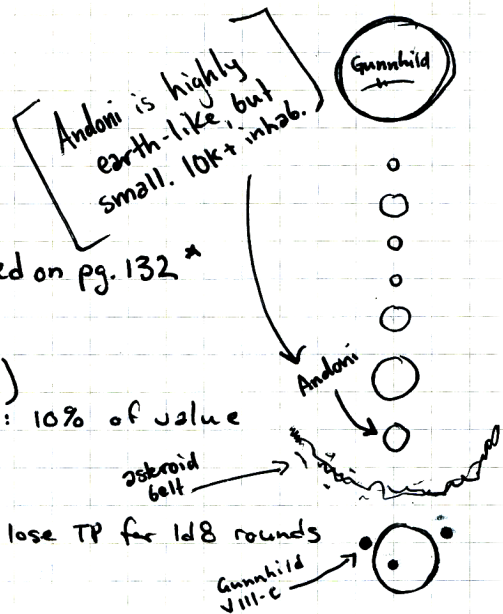
Dr. Hiromusi Sekler (middle-aged, Japanese woman)

"Mr. Titan" a mere captain who betrayed Mr. Sicarian.

- Next game Tuesday, July 15th

[travel time is
6 days/hex]

775,000
(expen ~3500/mo)
10 years @ 5%
8120.08/mo
w 3 strikes for
missed pay
(2000 fee after)



Excerpts from the GM's Notebook

Part Two

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Gunnhild System Drawing

These sorts of little diagrams are all over my notes, and while they don't necessarily translate into maps for use in a campaign, they give me an idea of what is where in relation to what else. Given that the whole first adventure in Swan Song was taking place in the Gunnhild system, I wanted to know at least what kinds of stuff was floating around in space between Andoni and her closest neighbors. I can't draw to save my life, but little doodles like this can help me work out the narrative space of a game in a way that words don't always manage to.

SWN House Rules

My first exposure to Stars Without Number as a system was reading the actual play posts of John Harper's campaign on Google+ (that much-maligned social media platform seemingly only used by tabletop RPG designers and fans, these days). These are, in most cases, unmodified from his own campaign, which ran about as long as Swan Song did, as far as I can remember, and incorporate a few tweaks that make SWN feel a lot more like the more modern designs than just the sum of the OSR-style retroclone the game is designed to be on the surface. I think we used the salvage rules a few times throughout the game, but treating Culture as Circles is the most significant thing, here.

For those of you unfamiliar with Circles, I stole it from Burning Wheel for use in both Mirrorshades and Stars Without Number and it has done nothing but bring amazing stuff into my campaigns. In short, it's a mechanism that allows players to pull NPCs into the game based on the appropriate skills and backgrounds their characters might have. A Culture (Criminal) roll might allow you to find a friendly smuggler anywhere in space but a Culture (Andoni) roll could find you a friend on that planet or an Andonian on any other. I love allowing PCs to bring in characters and the Apocalypse World style roll resolution means that the people they're finding might be stalwart allies, folks with a grudge or some conflicting middle thing. It makes my job as a GM a lot easier when the PCs are giving me potential adversaries on their own.

Andoni: What Is Known?

This kind of roll-table came up a few times in my prep for SWN - it's a very rich universe and often when players say "I want to know what my character would know about this" it's useful to have a list of potential secrets and tidbits of information ready, and all the better if you can tie them and their usefulness to a roll. What I love about this particular table is that there's some very strong hints here that Andoni was home to alien tech from the very beginning, and these notes would spin out the entire Pi / Warmind storyline from the beginning. I often wonder what would have happened if the PCs had picked up on or focused on the Andoni stuff from the get-go...

"Mr.Titan, a merc captain who betrayed Mr.Sicarian"

Here's the first canon mention of Mr.Titan, who existed before the Pfotenhauer Society was really a focus or even fully fleshed out in the game. Again, something else that I was so happy to see spiral up and out into the game and what would become another of the major arcs of Swan Song. This was all Geoff, who came up with the tortured past and quest for revenge that would follow Mr. S all the way through to the end. Like with Circles, some of my favourite content in the game, some of the stuff that would surprise me most, came from my fellow players.

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